

Interview with 1st Lieutenant Bill Henry, USMCR, Co. H, 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines. Vietnam. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, Washington, DC, on 19 April 2005.

You say you were from Carthage, Mississippi.

That's correct.

When did you join the Marines?

In my junior year at Mississippi State University, I entered the Marine Corps OCS program in the fall of 1966, was commissioned in mid-December, and then attended the basic school from January through June of 1967.

When did you get orders to Vietnam?

I got orders out of the basic school, but they were delayed because of three collapsed lungs, and I wound up having lung surgery at Bethesda Naval Hospital in June. Then I went through a rehab program from June until I landed in-country at the end of November of '67.

Did you go to Danang first?

I did.

You were assigned to your unit right away?

Correct.

What was your unit?

The Second Battalion, Third Marines, Hotel Company, Second Platoon.

Hotel Company, then, you were in command of that Company?

I was in command of Second Platoon.

Where did you go after you got to Vietnam and you were assigned to your unit?

Where were they at the time?

They called it a triangle complex, and it was south of Danang, south of Marble Mountain, and for a period of about 3 months we worked what was called a Rocket Belt around the south side of Danang. During that time, we primarily confronted sniper fire, booby traps, that type of harassing situation.

And then at some point, you moved on out to . . .?

We went north.

You went north, along the DMZ, up in that area?

In that area. We left the Danang area at the end of the Tet Offensive of '68, and went to Phu Bai for about a week of rehab, and then we left the last day of March on a long truck convoy to Ca Lu, which is on Route 9, and we participated in securing the mountains so they could rebuild the bridges that were going into Khe Sanh. We operated on the south side of Route 9, and operated there for a while, and then we actually flew up by helicopters to the east end of the runway at Khe Sanh for a week or so.

At that point we were then involved in Scotland II, which was an operation on the west side of Khe Sanh at Hill 689. We left that Hill on the 21st of April, headed due west to a set of foothills where, somewhere around 40 bodies of Charlie 1/9 had been on the ground for about 6 days. We went to recover those bodies. It was a large, large operation with probably more than two or three battalions involved. There were an awful lot of casualties in the course of recovering those bodies.

What do you recall about that incident?

It was well planned. There was a tremendous effort made to try to be very, very fast to the extent of a lot of people's safety. For example, when we left the hill it was . . . We were to have gone down there very quickly and taken the body bags and a certain unit was to have secured the hills. Then they were going to fly those out and then we were going to return back up Hill 689 for the night.

So we left all our flight jackets and e-tools on top of the hill, and it was to have just been a real fast movement. I got wounded on the way to that hill by an artillery shot that came out of Laos. But when the platoon hit the hill it was much more well defended than they had anticipated and they were not able to secure the hill. Consequently, they were not able to push over the side to where a lot of the bodies were, so they wound up spending the night without an opportunity to have equipment to even dig holes to secure themselves. It was a terribly frightful night, earmarked by a lot of casualties. It's one of those days that a lot of the members of the platoon remember very, very well.

By this time you were out of action, though, you had been hit already?

On the way down the hill, about halfway to the objective, I was wounded by artillery and taken in a poncho back up the hill by a series of people relieving one another to carry me up. They had a gun ship that was actually flying in support of our mission, drop down and pick me up, and flew me about a mile and a half or 2 miles back to Khe Sanh. They just threw me on the floor and a gunner put his foot in my back to hold me into the helicopter.

When I got to Khe Sanh the helicopter landed, essentially, right outside the door of the aid station there. They came running out with just an empty litter, slid it under the thing, and pulled me out on it. From the time the helicopter hit the ground my guess is it probably wasn't 15 seconds before they were out, had me on the litter, and back down into a shaft that went into this big aid station.

Charlie Med, probably.

That's correct.

Had you been treated by a corpsman out in the field before you got on the chopper?

I had. I was experiencing very severe loss of blood and the actual shot itself, I guess, put my body into some shock. I initially was not receiving very much pain considering that I had had a round go through the center of my right foot, another round go through my right back, and burns up my left arm.

This was the result of the explosion?

From the artillery.

From the artillery explosion?

Yes, a 105 artillery round is what most people have suspected it was.

And it landed quite near where you were standing.

It did. I didn't have any remnants of shrapnel left in me. Everything that hit me went through me.

Wow! So the corpsman patched you up and stopped the bleeding?

He did. He couldn't get my shoes off and all, but he did lay the packing to try to slow the bleeding and wrapped my chest as well as they could to try to pack it as well. The reports from some of the other units, when I hit the top of the hill they were waiting to follow my platoon in succession, and I guess it was like a show. The lieutenant from the other platoon got hit and it left the platoon that I was in without any direct leadership at the time. A very stalwart older company gunnery sergeant moved forward and really gave support to the platoon and helped them accomplish their mission, which was a wonderful thing.

You were a 2nd lieutenant at this point?

A 1st lieutenant.

Oh, you were a 1st lieutenant already. Okay. So you're down, we got you down in Charlie Med and you were describing that scene to me yesterday. What did you see when you got down in that hole in the ground?

By virtue of having been at Bethesda, I was well experienced with the Navy medical system and I understood how corpsman, doctors, and nurses and all worked so well together. When I was taken deep into this aid station at Charlie Med, a very, very senior corpsman looked at me and knew that I was identified as an officer. He said, "Well, Lieutenant, it looks like you're going to have an occasion to use your Blue Cross/Blue Shield."

I looked up at him and said, "You know, Doc, when I got my Navy doctors I canceled my policy." And it just broke the whole aid station up.

But the unbelievable thing to me is that in my life since those times and having watched movies and seen pictures of these underground bunkers with huge beams and IV bottles and stuff hanging from nails up in the top and this sort of stuff, that's exactly the way Charlie Med was operated. It was very large. It had a yellow globed lighting system, by my memory. It was an incredible amount of hard, hard work. As I later found out, the major triage center was at Dong Ha, which I went to later, but for the ones who were suffering major blows, the first drop was to Khe Sanh, which was so much quicker.

They took some great pains to go in and clear away a lot of the boots and clothes and stuff and were able to attack the wound in an effort to stop most of the bleeding, which was very serious, as it turned out, for me.

So they got you stabilized?

Yes.

What other treatment did they do for you? Did they give you morphine for pain?

No, I did not. I did not receive any pain shots until I immediately went into debridging surgery at 1:00 in the morning, and I got hit in the field about 2:00. I was pretty well maintaining myself until I got ready to leave Dong Ha. At that point, everything came apart.

At Charlie Med at Khe Sanh, they just stabilized, they didn't do a debridging there, did they?

No, they did not. They had a tremendous amount of work to do. The round that hit my foot went through my boot. I'm sure they did, in a sense, do a fair amount of debridging work because just to get the boot off of my foot would have required a great deal of cutting and hacking and trying to get the leather pieces out of my foot and that sort of stuff. It was a real, real mess.

How long were you actually at Charlie Med before you were medevaced out of there?

I'm not real certain. I would suspect it was probably something on the order of a couple of hours, maybe, maybe not that much. I went in there on a gun ship and they took me out on another helicopter and I can't even recall the kind of helicopter they moved me on. I went from there to Dong Ha to a huge concrete slab out at a triage unit. Those people had, by my memory, water hoses and brushes, and they were looking at the more serious types of wounds.

The doctor singled me out to go in for surgery and said that I was bound to have internal damage. I said, "Doc, you picked the wrong one. I'm okay. I've had the upper lobe of my left lung taken out and I know what it feels like to have something wrong inside you and there's nothing in there wrong. He said, it can't be. "The shrapnel round hit the big muscle that goes down your back, had just been blown out by this round." He took me into x-ray, and it turned out that I did not have any internal damage.

It was just like a filet knife had just scraped the rib cage off. It was that close. He had commented to me that an eighth of an inch closer and it would have sent those bones into my chest cavity and I wouldn't have had a chance.

Where did the shrapnel enter your chest?

From underneath my arm, and it just went straight across my rib cage.

So it never got in the internal cavity at all?

Correct.

It sliced you.

It did. It was just like a filet knife.

Right across from right to left?

From right to left, from under the arm around to the back. It was about 3 inches wide and maybe 4 or 5 inches long.

Where did it exit? Was there an exit on your left side somewhere?

No, it exited just before the backbone.

So it kind of went transversely through your body, from the, near your right armpit, maybe?

From the back of my right armpit, not from under it, but from the back of it.

From the back of your right armpit, and the shrapnel went right . . .

Across the side the rib cage.

Okay, and came out on the other side, on the left side.

It actually didn't go inside the ribs at all. It just went through the meat, took all the muscle out--tore that muscle out.

So what did they do for you after the x-ray?

Well, he put me on board a C-130, and, along with a lot of other people, we went to Phu Bai. They had a major surgery unit down there. That's where I had the pretty extensive debriding surgery. At the end of that, I lost about 2 days, and I guess it was from the loss of so much blood. But I don't remember what happened the next couple of days.

So you were at Phu Bai for a few days, anyway?

At least 3, and then they sent me down to Danang to be evacuated from the country. I had originally had evacuation orders to go to the Philippines. But my blood count was not back, so, I missed the day. Then the next day the orders came and I went to the 249th Army General Hospital in Tokyo. The big Navy hospital, Yokosuka, in Japan, was full so they sent me to an Army hospital.

When was this date-wise?

I got hit on the 21st of April 1968. I wound up in Japan for maybe 10 days, so you can back that up, and I wound up coming stateside on May the 8th. So it took 18 days, to get stateside.

What did they do for you in the Army hospital?

I went through another debriding surgery, and I just sat there and waited and waited and waited, and finally an Army colonel, who was in the bed next to me, said, "Well, Bill, they're going to have to find a way to get you home or they're going to have to deal with me. He called the chief corpsman over and said, "I want this guy have a manifest to get home or you're going to have two wheelchairs down here, one for me and one for him, and we're going to see the CO of the hospital." So, to say the least, I started going home that afternoon.

They had done some debriding of your foot wound and your chest wound.

That's correct. They kept them open and during the course of all of this time I was having what they call wound care three times a day. They would come in and pull all the gauze out, pour in the peroxide, and take the little tweezers or forceps or whatever they called them, and take all the dead skin or dead tissue or whatever out of the foot and then they would re-pack it.

It was quite a scary thing because I had had a corpsman in mid-March that got hit just south of Danang, and he had been very seriously hit, but he contracted gangrene and died. It just had me horrified that I was not getting correct wound care.

Where, in the Army hospital?

Any of them. I was insistent upon having my wounds checked to make sure they stayed clean. And it was a very painful thing to pull that gauze from those wounds every day.

And have the peroxide poured in there.

That's right; it was very, it hurt a lot.

Wow! How were you medevaced, then, from Japan? How did you get there?

I went home on an Air Force C-141 that had just stacks and stacks of litters against each side and down the middle. We landed in Elmendorf, Alaska to refuel, and then from there went to Scott Air Force Base, just across from St. Louis. Then the next day they broke us up into smaller groups on small airplanes and they just shuttled us to the respective hospitals where we had been assigned. They wound up taking me to Millington, Tennessee, which was the closest hospital to my home in Mississippi.

When you got to the Naval Hospital there in Millington, what did they do for you then?

I was assigned to the SOQ [Sick Officers Quarters] and as was the practice, every time you changed hospitals there had to be a doctor present when the wounds were opened, and a doctor had to prescribe the new round of medications. Nurses and corpsmen didn't have the authority to see the first one. When I got assigned and was sent to the ward, I kept screaming to get my wounds checked because it had been a full day of travel that I had not had my wounds opened and looked at.

It was on a weekend, I think, when I got into the hospital, and very few doctors were around. But, as it turned out, an internist was there and I don't think he knew much about orthopedic care. I know damn well he didn't know much about how things hurt, because he reached down there where it used to take 15 minutes or more to bubble those gauzes out of my foot, he reached down with one hand and pulled it out.

Ouch.

This old hospital I was in had the pipe running down the roof of the building. I thought I could reach them when he grabbed those things and pulled it. It was pretty brutal. But, as it turned out, the young nurse that was on duty that very day is now my wife.

Wow!

She got to see the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Wow, that's something. After they cleaned your wounds, what was on the agenda for your recovery there?

I went through some fairly extensive surgeries, and, having previously had some surgery at Bethesda, I knew the status of the hospitals, and I knew that it was one of the best in the world. I was sad that I didn't get assigned to go back there. But, as it turned out, there was a young orthopedist out of Wisconsin named Dr. George Lucas, who, since serving with the Navy, has gone back to the teaching hospital at Madison. He has written several digital orthopedic textbooks and very likely was one of the best 2 or 3 percent of surgeons in the United States, or

possibly the world. My foot was so destroyed that you could put your hand or finger in the top of my foot and touch the bottom layer of skin all the way across my foot, and he reconstructed my foot. To this day, it still works, although there is some pain and swelling and stuff from time to time. But he did save my foot, which was just unbelievable.

He reconstructed the bones and everything?

He did.

How did he do that? Where did he get the bones from?

He just turned my foot. My foot is turned to the outside. He brought the bones back and overlapped them some way. I'm not exactly sure what he did. But, my foot, from the center of the arch of my foot to the front is turned outward. It's all there, but there is a big hole right in the middle of my foot.

Now he was, at this time, a Navy orthopedic surgeon.

He was, and he sure got an incredible amount of practice. While I was there he even wound up making a thumb for one of the guys that had been hit bad. He was just a phenomenally talented man.

You say you still keep in touch with him?

I did, for many, many years. I've not heard from him in the last 4 or 5 years, but we exchange Christmas cards a lot.

You say his name was George.

Dr. George Lucas. He was at Madison, Wisconsin in the teaching hospital for a long time, and then he went to, I believe, Wichita, Kansas, and that was the last address that I knew of. He was incredibly talented. He became quite an artist and captured some of the scenes of the old homes and roses and stuff around Millington. There just wasn't anything he couldn't do.

That's interesting. He'd probably be an interesting guy to talk to, find out what he did on

I think he would.

How long were you there at Millington?

A long time. It took a long time. I had a lot of skin grafts to plug all these holes up. He just had such a sense of humor. One day he was trying to take some of the stitches out of the skin graft and the 5:00 whistle blew. He just started folding his stuff up and said, "Well, Bill, I'll see you tomorrow."

A good sense of humor, huh?

He did. He was wonderful, just absolutely wonderful. I wish everybody that had problems could be so lucky as to have somebody like him.

At the time he was probably a lieutenant commander or something?

He was.

I think I found him in the book here. George Lamoy Lucas.

Oh, he's something. I'm not talking about just close to average, I'm talking about he is at the very, very top of the pile. There were orthopedic doctors that would hang around down there some because I had casts that had to be reworked all the time and several of them assisted him in my surgery. And those doctors even told me, "Bill, you cannot imagine what this man did." He sparked disbelief even among his doctors as to the level that he could take surgery. He was really special.

Wow! I'm going to see if I can track him down.

He's really a nice man.

After you got out of the hospital there at Millington, what happened then?

I was medically retired from the Marine Corps with a percent disability and was engaged, by then, to a nurse. We got married the next time and I went on and rather than see a psychiatrist to try to heal myself I went back to school and got a masters degree. I joined the workforce and wound up spending about 28 years at Mississippi State University handling their fringe benefit programs, all the health insurances and retirements and workers comp and all the supplemental insurance programs and that sort of stuff.

You retired now from that?

I am now retired, yes.

When did you retire?

I've been retired 8 years. I spend a lot of time chasing Mississippi State sports and fishing.

Hey, sounds good.

Not a bad life.

Bass fisherman?

I do, I love to bass fish.

Do you still have any residual effects of your wounds?

I do, and probably will, I know I will for the remainder of my life. I have some swelling and I have some bone to bone stuff that's starting to develop in the outside of my ankle. Overall, it's been a wonderful thing to have a foot rather than a prosthesis.

You can walk on it okay?

Yes.

I guess he did a marvelous job.

He did. I have special shoes I have to have made where they take molds of my feet and send them off. And they contour a shoe just to fit that shape. So it's a little bit of work to make do with that. I have discovered different kinds of wraps and supports and stuff like that to try to make it comfortable for me. But, it's not much considering what the alternatives would be.

Yes. Well, usually I ask people I interview, but I think you may have answered the question, I tell them, it's been 30 something years since you were in Vietnam and do they think about it much anymore, but I guess you must think about it a lot because of your injuries.

How about every day I put my socks on.

You think about Vietnam every day you put your socks on.

That's right. We just had a reunion of my platoon. I had been doing a lot of reading and trying to establish a daily log to show all these boys where they had been and where they were when different kinds of things happened to them. It was amazing to see their recall once these events came back to them.

The startling thing is that there were 2.9 million people that went to Vietnam. Less than 15 percent of those were actually combat participants. That's about 420,000. Of the 50,000 that were killed, probably 50 of those were combat, maybe more. That put it down to about 380 or so. The reports from the VA now are that about 100,000 of those combat people have died since the war was over. My numbers in my platoon pretty much support that.

So that's down to about 280,000 or 290,000 people that survive today that had combat experiences in Vietnam. When you compare that to the population in the United States, that leaves us at 1/10th of 1 percent of the population. So, those of us that had those experiences represent a very, very small part of our country now.

Yes. Well, I want to thank you for spending time with me today. I really appreciate it. I can't tell you how much I appreciate you telling me about your experiences. I need your address so I can you the transcript when it's completed.

2418 Douglas MacArthur Drive, Starkville, MS, 39759.

Great. Well, thanks again, Mr. Henry.

Sure. I hope you have the occasion to visit with Dr. Lucas. You'll find a treat there.

I am going to track him down, and I think I know ways of doing that.

Well, if you have any luck, boy, that would be appreciated.

Great. Well, thanks again, and, take care.

Thank you so much.

Good bye.